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Book Review by Tim Spiekerman

**Bellow’s Gift**

*The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune, 1915–1964,* by Zachary Leader.
Random House, 832 pages, $40

Saul Bellow was a temperamental, ambitious, prolific workaholic—whom everyone, including his new biographer, seemed to like. Zachary Leader’s exhaustive and meticulously researched study of Bellow’s life and work through 1964—a second volume will follow—is the first to be published after the novelist’s death. Although Leader, an English professor at the University of Roehampton, leans heavily on an earlier account of Bellow by James Atlas, we learn that his subject wasn’t entirely comfortable with that “self-appointed biographer,” whose “presence… on the margins” cramped his style. While writing what turned out to be his last novel, *Ravelstein* (2000), which describes the death of his friend Allan Bloom from AIDS, Bellow worried that Atlas “would have liked nothing better than to break the story of Allan’s illness to a public of scandal-consumers.” Bellow could be prickly, defensive, and fiercely competitive, but he was also loyal to his many close friends. With an eagle eye for slights and injustices, it’s hard to imagine he wouldn’t have complained about this biographer, too, but Leader is clearly a fan and had the full cooperation of Bellow’s relatives, wives, children, and many friends. One senses they all knew this would be the definitive biography, so they’d better help set the historical record straight.

Leader’s book begins in czarist Russia, where Bellow’s parents and siblings lived, often handsomely, until the deteriorating political situation and the arrest and imprisonment of Bellow’s father, Abraham (who somehow escaped), forced them to flee to Montreal, where Saul was born. A bootlegging scheme gone bad caused Abraham to move the family to Chicago, where they settled in a neighborhood of Russian Jewish immigrants. Leader’s account of Bellow’s early life is wonderful, even for those who have read *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), which covers a lot of the same ground. His portrait of Chicago—always Bellow’s favorite city—is especially evocative, which isn’t always the case when Leader discusses other times and places. Saul’s brother Maury, the bag-man for one of Al Capone’s politicians, “collected money [for his boss] in a little Gladstone bag, skimming off a portion for himself, half of which he gave to his mother.” Maury, a central character in *Augie March,* later owned hotels, hobnobbed with mobsters, and became a millionaire, as did his brother Sam, who appears in *Herzog* (1964). Saul was the rebel—an obstinate, struggling writer who seemed to his father and brothers to be rejecting the American dream.

Leader’s chapters are organized chronologically around people, places, and novels. Bellow lived all over the place—Chicago, New York City, Mexico, Minneapolis, Paris, Italy, New Haven, the Hudson River Valley, San Juan—had numerous close relations and friends, most for life, and wrote six novels, many short stories, and a play during the period covered by Leader’s book. And yet as we follow Bellow from place to place, learn of his struggles writing this or that novel, meet his impressive array of friends and three of his five wives, the day-by-day progression can sometimes become overwhelming, prompt-
ing a desire on the reader’s part to come up for air, to pause and get some distance, to ask some questions.

H ere’s how bellow described his routine while living in Positano: “write from eight in the morning, swim at noon; and then that lethal lunch which I’m too hungry to turn away; at three, when I’m supposed to read Hegel, my lids are coming down.” Wait a minute, one might wonder, when did Bellow become the kind of guy who was supposed to be reading Hegel? When his most famous character, Moses Herzog, drafts letters to Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, we might wonder just when Bellow became so highly educated. When he complains that his first wife, Anita, was slow to pick up Spanish in Mexico, when we see him speaking and writing in French, Italian, and Yiddish, Leader offers no explanation, as if that’s just what writers do. To be fair, it’s not that Leader rarely pauses to reflect on what learning meant to his subject, how it figured in his vocation as a writer, or even when he found the time to read so many books. When Bellow says, late in the biography, that Herzog’s “extensive education doesn’t work for him at all…because you can’t apply the lessons of high culture to the facts of ordinary life,” readers are likely to find the heart of the biography: what is the life of a writer like? According to his second wife, Sondra, whose father was a bohemian painter, Bellow seemed “part middle-class Jewish business man, part contemplative, scholarly rabbi.” He “went to work,” so to speak, like it was a regular job…and as long as I lived with him (and forever after, as far as I knew) he followed the same daily routine consistently. You could set your watch by him—an early breakfast, work in his studio, emerge for lunch (with a book—not his), and then edit the morning’s work.

Bellow wrote tons of stuff he never published, and one of the great surprises and pleasures of Leader’s book is being able to read a lot of it. He quotes heavily from an abandoned novel about Bellow’s father, who was left out...
of Augie March but included in Herzog; a trenchant series of stories and character sketches that Leader calls “the Zetland manuscripts”; and a spare and rather morose novel, set in a hospital, where two old invalids discuss death. When Bellow decided to abandon “the hospital novel,” which he said was “poisoning my life,” the idea for Augie March popped into his head:

Subject and language appeared at the same moment. The language was immediately present—I can’t say how it happened, but I was suddenly enriched with words and phrases. The gloom went out of me and I found myself with magical suddenness writing a first paragraph.

According to Leader, whose book sometimes flashes forward, Bellow was apparently at work on another novel at the end of his life, but his powers began to fade and he was unable to complete it. Until late in his career, writing didn’t pay, so he spent a lot of time applying for grants and moving around the country for temporary teaching gigs, which confirmed. So too, it seems, was Ralph Ellison, with whom Bellow sometimes shared his dilapidated Hudson Valley mansion, and whom he admired for the “strength and independence” of his mind: “Ralph, it was clear, had thought things through for himself, and his ideas had little in common with the views of the critics in the literary quarters.” Bellow valued his own independence, of course, and thought he had broken new literary ground with the form and language of Augie March, but he also craved approval, read all the reviews of his work, and complained bitterly when criticized, often writing scathing letters to his detractors and holding grudges for years. When Richard Poier, who earlier had written a negative review of Herzog in the Partisan Review, was admitted to the Century Association in 1977, Bellow resigned in protest.

By 1964, Leader concludes, Saul Bellow “had arrived at the pinnacle of American letters, and he knew it.” Always in a hurry, always trying to prove himself, he was now famous and had written his two most popular and well-regarded novels. With less to prove and a respectful international audience, he would soon turn to weightier social and political themes in the incendiary and controversial Mr. Sammler’s Planet (1970), about a holocaust survivor’s bewildered attempt to make sense of the chaotic late 60s. But he would circle back in Humboldt’s Gift (1975) to the enduring interest in friendship, private life, and writing that Zachary Leader so compellingly captures in this fine biography.

Tim Spiekerman is chairman of the political science department at Kenyon College and author of Shakespeare’s Political Realism: The English History Plays (SUNY Press).
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